

Oral History Interview with Mikell Herman
Parchman Oral History Project
Interview conducted by Courtney DeLong on June 18, 2019
In Charleston, Mississippi

[Interview Begins]

00:00 DELONG: Um, so this is June 18. This is the Parchman Oral History Project. Interview questions are being asked by Courtney DeLong and this is Mikell Herman. Mikell, do you want to introduce yourself

00:14 HERMAN: Yes, I'm Mikell Herman. I stay in Charleston, Mississippi. I been here ever since, all my life really, because I was born in Philipp. All up there in Tallahatchie County.

00:30 DELONG: How old are you, if you don't mind me asking?

00:33 HERMAN: Yeah, I'm sixty-seven.

00:35 DELONG: So, as you know we're conducting a project about integration of the East Tallahatchie school district in 1970 to 1971. So can you tell us a little about that school year for you? Just what comes to mind.

00:47 HERMAN: It was a whole lot. It was a lot different for everybody. Everybody was going through different things. It was really tougher for the Blacks, over there. It was just tough. Um, I played football over there when school first integrated, so I don't think we always got equal rights over there. But just coming on the campus myself the first time I went out for football I had the worst feeling in my life. I never been feel like that. Then some band students come out. And so I was walking to the building and they holler out "where this dog?" You know that's just one of them things that still bother me a lot. It was a rough experience for me. At that time.

1:44 DELONG: Were you at Allen Carver before 1970?

1:48 HERMAN: Yeah, I was there.

1:51 DELONG: What was the typical school day like at Allen Carver?

1:54 HERMAN: I reckon, I can say it was comfortable, you know? You in your own zone. When school integrated it was just a different zone we was in. But Allen Carver was just normal like I say like it is now.

- 2:23 DELONG: When did you first find out that they were integrating the schools, how did you react?
- 2:28 HERMAN: Well when I first found out, it was kind of scary like. We was all in school, we was all in class some kids was out there protesting, and we really didn't know what was going on. Half the kids didn't know what was going on and the other half was outside protesting. So, it looked like to me that everybody was scared including the teachers. You know, it was just something new. Things was changing and you can see on T.V. now when the be protesting how things, one side feel and then the other, that's the way we felt then. It was scared. It was scary.
- 3:08 DELONG: So, you found out that the schools were going to have to integrate when you were in tenth grade. You knew that the next year, or?
- 3:14 HERMAN: The next year, we knew that everything was changing. You know? We knew that. But at the same time, when school finally got integrated, that's when it really got tough. I have two sisters, the protested more than I did. I hate to say it, but I did. So, they load up a lot of kids and tote them to Parchman at that time. I reckon they was trying to scare them to stop protesting and stuff. But both of them was over there in Parchman. They didn't treat them bad. They tried to scare the boys and bring prison out to show them how rough prison is. But they couldn't hurt no kids, with the kids out there.
- 4:14 DELONG: How did your parents feel about when your sisters went to Parchman?
- 4:17 HERMAN: My mother raised me, we were raised by one parent, but she was outraged by it. That's when everything broke loose. I really don't know how she really, because she never said too much about it. But you know all the parents started marching then. And I reckon after that they started, the brought the kids back home. I was glad to see my sisters at that time, because hadn't seen them in two days so. People was giving reports on them, they alright. People stirred down there. I guess, I don't know. I guess they was trying to bluff them, I think, at that time. They ain't put no dogs on them or nothing. But you know, that was the way it was.
- 5:05 DELONG: How did your mother and how did you guys find out that your sisters were going to Parchman?
- 5:09 HERMAN: Well we all, this is a little town so it really ain't nothing going on that you ain't gone know about. They was protesting. My mama, she wasn't in the marches but she kept an eye out on children. Everybody in Charleston knew that they had these busses out here getting these kids. That's when the town got in uproar. Everybody, I think things changed right there It was gone get, it looked like it was gone get violent one time. But I don't think Charleston ever did get violent

5:43 RUFUS: No they marched and everything.

5:51 HERMAN: My best time back there then was uh, I got a chance the see Martin Luther King.

6:00 DELONG: Wow, when was that?

6:00 HERMAN: It was in the same time frame. You know when the kids got out of there, that's when they brought Martin Luther King in here. And so they had them marching all the way down there, remember that? In the streets. He came marching at that little church on West Mem, that's where everything was at. Thangs got a little quieter after he came through. You know they was scared to do anything to us. I reckon they was scared, didn't nothing happen after that.

6:31 DELONG: When he came through, what did he? So he led a march?

6:35 HERMAN: He marched all the way to the courthouse, at the time, the courthouse that we have now wasn't there, so we had the other courthouse. At that time you know they had the two bathrooms. You know we had a white and Black bathroom. The door was painted Black for the Blacks and white for the whites and same than with the water fountains. And he spoke on all that. Then after they started disappearing and had to paint all them doors and stuff uptown. But at that time, I guess everybody just knew what to drink out of. You couldn't drink out of, you couldn't go in the door that's white, if you were Black.

7:20 DELONG: Even in 1970?

7:21 HERMAN: Yeah, that stayed up there in school integrated then it was still there. It wasn't supposed to be there. Actually I think it was there until they tore the building down. But you could go into any building you wanted to but the reminder was still there.

7:41 DELONG: Did you know Ms. Lucy at all?

7:45 HERMAN: Who?

7:47 DELONG: Ms. Lucy Boyd

7:49 HERMAN: Yeah

7:49 DELONG: You did? Could you tell us a little about her?

7:49 HERMAN: Only thing I really about her, at that time that she was just about the leader of the thangs going on in Charleston. You know I really don't, I never know a person, I just

know them when I see them. You know how you know people when you see them. But, she had a lot of respect from Blacks, let me put it that way.

8:14 DELONG: So I think we're just going to ask you some general questions about your childhood. If that's okay.

8:15 HERMAN: Yeah.

8:15 DELONG: What would you say growing up in Charleston was for you?

8:20 HERMAN: It was tough. You know we came from single parents, and it was alright. There was three of us. Me and my two sisters. We lived in a two bedroom. Two room house. You know, your kitchen and you slept in your kitchen. And your bed the same thang. You know just, you had the outside restroom. But had to flush to commode. But that was still going on, you know like outside. And grab the tub up and take a bath. That was during integration. It was tough in Charleston. You know, it's still tough out here now. You got to go to different places. You know like Glendora somewhere you see some stuff going on in our childhood and I didn't even believe it but I seen it. But, my mother work in, you know did house work and stuff like that. So we were real poor. So we, we still is. We doing a lot better than what I was when I was. I guess what everybody be saying, they want they children doing better than they did. So you know, I got more room than I ever need, now. At that time then, we all you know we all ate and slept in the same place. It was really tough. Winter time you froze to death, it was just. It's hard to just put in words. But I done had the hard times, I done had real hard times.

9:57 DELONG: And what were your sisters like growing up? How much younger or older are they?

10:00 HERMAN: They younger than I am. So, really i knew my, one of my sisters, she integrated before anybody, Gloria. Cause she, I went to school. We was going to Allen Carver, so I caught a bus twice and everytime I go I could never see her. So I came back home and told my mama that she wasn't going to school. My mama jumped all into that. She sneaked over there and signed up for the white school. When it come to find out she said I'm going to school. You know we just practiced to call her a lie. But you know she was. But she had went over there. And so when she went over there. She tells me that it was rough over there, for her then. It wasn't nothing but two of them over there so it had to be real rough. Cause it was rough when I went over there when schools integrated. So I can imagine, i just have to imagine what she went through. But I know why she did, she never did explain. I never asked her really. But she was ready for change, I reckon before it started.

11:04 DELONG: Um, what year is that?

- 11:06 HERMAN: She went the year before schools integrated. It had to be what '69 or '70, some like that. '69, some like that.
- 11:17 DELONG: Did she say it was education there any different? Like were the classes any different or?
- 11:25 HERMAN: It was so much pressure on you, you know. You really can't say. I know when I went over there, things was different. For the Black kids. Especially with the white teachers. They did all this faking stuff, like they real friendly and nice and stuff. But actually, I'm not saying that I wasn't the smartest but I know it was the smartest Black kids in there and so I know in biology, the smartest ones in there was making A's at Allan Carver. There, they highest score was like 30 something and I knew that was wrong. But she smiled with us. She failed every Black that was in there. All the Whites passed, so I knew I recognized that. And then another thing I never did understand though, was why did they ever, they had two different, when you graduate they had two different books. The white kids and Black kids was in this book. But they had a all-white yearbook. So you know, this here just come out, I bet you like five years ago. Some kids looked through some thangs and found out that still going on, that's been five years ago.
- 12:46 DELONG: So when the schools first integrated, what stood out to you the most? What made the biggest impact on you?
- 12:57 HERMAN: It was so much. It was different from just going to school and class with a different race. Stuff that we wasn't used to. And now we all got to get together and go to school. It was tough. Just walking down the hall was tough. I seen where girls was going down the stairs. And I was playing then so I really thought I was kind of strong anyway. And a kid came up, and another boy played football with me, he gone make this boy go up the stairs and make the girl get out the way. That was the roughest time I seen. That's the only time I really wanted to fight. A teacher come up from somewhere and broke it up. I believe at that time I probably would've got thrown out then cause I was ready to fight then. I thought that that was wrong. He was showing his racism right then whether he know what it's about. That's when I first got a real—I really got a dose of it. It was there all the time. When I was playing football, I noticed it. You know they always told us, the parents told the other boys. After we played about two or three games, things changed. You know the atmosphere changed. You find out when you playing sports. Sports make you change. The parents didn't change. Some of the white kids would take the Black kids home. You know drive them home because they had all the trucks and stuff. And um, at that time one of the parent's kid wanted to, I reckon wanted to take the Black kid over to his house. You know when you doing so good, they had kind of got close. You know he told him, "It alright to play with them, but you don't bring them home with you." So that was another time, that touched me, it touched me kind of hard. It's alright to play with them, but don't bring them home with you. I thought that was, I

just never let anything get that personal to me, I didn't even do that. But just, it got better. Cause when I was in school I quit in the 12th.

15:31 DELONG: Really?

15:31 HERMAN: Yeah cause after that march I didn't go back. But my kids. All of them, I always wanted them to do better, so far all of them done, all of them done stepped up to the latter. So, that's all I can say on that. But thangs still rough. You got to go to the school house all the time to check on you kids. It's just white and Black, it's just in general, just rough. But our kids do get treated different, they still do that. It's gone take time to change. You know it's just, you see it on the news now and you see all the time. But I don't know, it's hard to explain. You know? What you been through. For myself really. For boys it was harder than girls, to me. It probably had, you know you don't know what the girls going through but it seemed like to me the boys caught more trouble from the daddies. From the boy's side of the daddy, white folks. You got certain ways, you got a certain thing you do. You couldn't look at a white girl, and all that. So I had a friend that did do it and they went down there. That was during the integration when we was playing football. So, I reckon they act like they was kind of coating a little bit or some like that. An uh the girl parents went down to the house at night and gave, told his daddy that the boy need to leave town because they was gone do some to him if he didn't. That was the first time I knew a Black kid got sent away. He gave him money to send him. He went to Chicago. Me and him was friends. But all of a sudden he just disappeared. And we didn't know what happened. And then you know the story come out later on, that's how I found out about they come down there and pay. You know, gave him money to leave. That was the stuff going on while we was integrating. I never knowed nobody, I never knowed no kid to get killed, but I know it's a couple of them that got sent away. I reckon they collect money, and get together and give it to them. I don't know what happened. I know they give them money to leave.

18:02 DELONG: Did any of the kids who got sent away ever come back? Or no?

18:05 HERMAN: You know they come back to visit. But they actually didn't come back to live.

18:12 DELONG: And so for extra curriculars, you said the football team was integrated?

18:18 HERMAN: Hmm?

18:19 DELONG: There was an integrated football team?

18:20 HERMAN: Yeah

18:23 DELONG: How did the team dynamics work at first

- 18:26 HERMAN: It was [laughs] well at practice it was tough because you know everybody was getting they licks in. Didn't nothing change. So, the younger guys came behind me because I had played over there at Allen Carver. The young dude behind me came in and played, they was rough on them because you know they just started. It was some boys way bigger than me, you know, tall and they bigger. So the white kids, they would pick on them. Cause you know they coordination was off and all that, the could do it. But me and the one I was talking about got sent away, they didn't mess with us because we could defend yourself. We was tough too. But, it was a lot of that stuff that wen on in practice.
- 19:24 DELONG: And what about cheerleading, homecoming and other activities?
- 19:25 HERMAN: Really, you didn't have that. We didn't, homecoming? I never did know what that was. And uh, not there at Allen Carver we had parades and everything. We just was used to it. But when schools integrated it wasn't going on. We never had a prom together. We didn't do that way until Morgan Freeman tried to get, he paid all the way. How long ago was like [to Rufus] That hasn't been that long ago.
- 19:58 RUFUS: He put an air conditioner in all the rooms and stuff. And the things kind of come to a change after all that. Thing got a little different. Everybody had to get used to one another. That's what the problem was. They wasn't used to Black and white going to school together. And after they got in there and seen that it wasn't gone be no damage everything kind of cooled out.
- 20:23 HERMAN: I just didn't see it.
- 20:26 RUFUS: It cooled down a little bit.
- 20:27 HERMAN: I tell you, it really was tough. You just wasn't, you wasn't there at the moment.
- 20:36 RUFUS: No I wasn't there, I was I was at work but I seen—
- 20:39 HERMAN: The atmosphere was, it was ready to burst.
- 20:44 RUFUS: Yeah.
- 20:47 HERMAN: You seen a lot of the most stuff from the outside than I did.
- 20:54 RUFUS: Yeah, well when they first integrated they had trouble with the white folks up on the hill, with guns. And stuff like that there and uh, and they finally, somebody finally went up there and got away nine, now I remember that.

21:10 HERMAN: See that part I ain't even know

21:11 RUFUS: Yeah they had guns. The people that used to have Piggly Wiggly, his brother was the main man of them up on that hill. I remember that.

21:27 HERMAN: That was the same time as integration was, wasn't it?

21:28 RUFUS: Yeah integration started.

21:34 DELONG: Um, so if you don't mind, this is more of a clarifying question for me. I know the day when they sent the kids to Parchman, did anyone know that was coming? Like was there a restraining order released ahead of time? Or was it just totally shock?

21:49 HERMAN: It was shock. Because I don't think nobody, I never heard nobody say anything about paperwork. I think they just—they went up there to make a scene up there and they just come and go the kids. Because they trying to make them break up. Anytime you got a whole Black group together, sticking together, they know. Separating Black people, that's what they always did. So, this what they was trying, this what they was trying back there then. It didn't work but they tried it.

22:23 RUFUS: I know back then, they had two leaders. They put them two leaders in different places. All to keep—I remember them doing that. My sister was down there, well went down there. Yeah they kept them about three days, was it? Or like four.

22:42 HERMAN: I thought it was two.

22:44 RUFUS: And they brought them back home. They was just trying to break it up about these meetings and stuff. And marches and stuff.

22: 52 HERMAN: I sure forgot about that. They sure had it because E.P. Sellars was in one place and they had "what you call it" in another place.

22:59 RUFUS: Yeah I remember that.

23:01 DELONG: In Parchman they had the kids separate?

23:04 RUFUS: They kept the two leaders separated.

23:06 DELONG: Okay, who were the leaders again?

23:08 HERMAN: E.P. Sellars

23:11 RUFUS: Yeah and uh, what's this boy down the street?

23:14 HERMAN: Luther Davis.

23:16 RUFUS: Luther Davis. Yeah, I remember that, it's coming back.

23:23 HERMAN: I sure forgot about that, they sure did that. Like I say I wasn't too deep in that marching and stuff. Until Martin Luther King, I had to get in that line. Had to be a history moment. A lot of people didn't even know he came to Charleston.

23:43 RUFUS: See when anybody come to Charleston, they went to the post office because that's government. Everybody come here, to have a speak or some like that they come right in from of the court, to the, post office, Because that's government. Everybody that came.

24:03 HERMAN: No, they couldn't get in front of that courthouse.

24:10 RUFUS: They couldn't because the post office is government. That's what they did.

24:09 HERMAN: We was still using the white and Black bathroom at the time.

24:14 RUFUS: Yeah, but that's what they did. Always, whoever came. They got in front of the post office

24:20 HERMAN: And y'all do know they had the water fountains too right? We had—I went through all that. That stuff you see on TV that—them water fountains that they fighting over and all that there, you know? We had all that.

24:48 DELONG: So, when your sister went to Parchman—or your sisters—can you tell me a little about your other sister as well.

24:56 HERMAN: Birdie? Well that's what I call her. They was together That's the only good thing about it. I don't think the ever separated those two. They stayed together. So, they came back home.

25:19 DELONG: How old was Birdie?

25:20 HERMAN: Ohh, please don't ask. She was younger than I was. At the time I was eighteen, she was five years younger than I am.

25:30 DELONG: So she was thirteen?

25:31 HERMAN: Yeah.

25:33 DELONG: Wash she even in high school yet?

25:34 HERMAN: Uh no, she was in middle school. But they all got them all because everybody was marching, they got them.

25:26 DELONG: Wow.

25:49 HERMAN: I told you they had about what, two or three busses didn't it?

25:52 RUFUS: Some like that but what they did was separate the head leader. The two boys that was the head leader. They put them in a different place so they wouldn't have no contact with the other one.

26:06 HERMAN: And also, they couldn't talk to the parents, that's when things really—thats when uhh—I think that's when Martin Luther King and of them got aired at. And so that's when uh Jackson, he came. He came down here a lot. We had about, I know we had about five or six marches didn't we?

26:34 RUFUS: Yeah

26:41 DELONG: Also if you think about your sisters' experience there. When Gretta came home, did you notice (inaudible): did you sisters go back to protesting after?

26:53 HERMAN: Yeah. They wasn't scared. I don't know, my personal self, I just didn't do the marching. My two sisters, they never was scared of nothing. They ain't never been scared.

27:10 RUFUS: I think they said they fed them good and everything so—

27:13 HERMAN: They ain't treat them: all that that was about, like I still say, all that that was about was trying to scare them and break it them up.

27:20 RUFUS: Ummhmm yeah, that's what it was.

27:25 DELONG: Someone mentioned something to us about a group of students being sent to Parchman a second time for a couple of weeks. Do you know anything about that?

27:33 HERMAN: Well I don't remember that, cause I know my sister wasn't in it. That's probably why—they might have did it, but my sister wasn't in that. I couldn't have gotten in it, because I wasn't marching nowhere. I don't know why.

27:50 DELONG: And did you guys feel scared when you realized what happened?

- 27:55 HERMAN: I was to a point. It's always—anytime you do some like that, you always get scared. Because you don't know where—I didn't know where my sisters was. I knew where they was at but I didn't know—when you said Parchman back then you be thinking about that sledgehammer times. That's all we ever learned. So it's always bad when you hear about that. But they ain't have them in there with them inmates and stuff, so. Then we found that, so everything there—To me, my sisters said they had a ball down there. You know like how kids play and stuff. It was still—it was rough for my mother, I noticed that.
- 28:39 RUFUS: They really wanted to break the marching up and the two leaders. The two head leaders. That was they main goal, to keep them away from the crowd. The two head leaders. That was they main goal.
- 28:55 HERMAN: They was teenagers though, wasn't it?
- 28:58 RUFUS: They was teenagers, yeah. I said they was teenagers. All of them was teenagers. But the leaders, they was at the main leaders. They separate both of them. Then, I guess the panel went up there somewhere and got on, so they brought them back home. And that's, they ain't been back since.
- 29:25 HERMAN: Things was kind of, I reckon—stuff was kind of quiet until they put them kids. I think they was the ones that opened it up. Open the bottle of worms up. Because when they did, parents was working for people and they was scared to get involved thinking they gone lose they job. You know, stuff like that. But after they put the kids in prison, that's when all the parents started then. They figured they had started something that they really didn't want to start. Well, it was more parents then walking off of their job because of what they did. It ain't too much we knew because we wasn't there but I don't know. It ain't too much we can say about that. No more than what they told us. [laughs] (addresses Rufus's ringing phone) You can't work it?
- 30:18 RUFUS: No. This music mess. I cut it off.
- 30:38 DELONG: So, we read somewhere in a report that the kids had to report to the courthouse all the way in Oxford on that Wednesday. So did your sisters have to go anywhere for sort of like any legal reason. How did your parents get to them? How did they pick them up? What was that like? What was the aftermath?
- 30:53 HERMAN: They brought them back in the same place they picked them up at. And Mother—was was walking so we stayed in town all the time. So my mother was up there and all the parents was up there when they got off the bus. Which the parents didn't leave and started protesting theyself, until they brought the kids back. And so they ain't want that. I think they probably was gone try to keep them like a week or some.

31:21 DELONG: Could you tell me more about the parent's protests?

31:24 HERMAN: Uh, it wasn't violent. You know Martin Luther King stuff never been violent. Regardless of what they say about it, but it just—they boycotted these stores. And that hurt a lot of stores. Because you know at that time, they ain't say it then, but they depended on a lot of Black business. So anytime you boycott something, you hurt. When you go to hurting the town, people go to lightening up. And that's exactly what happened. Certain stores, you know like what he was talking about, Piggy Wiggly. Now he, we know what he was so you know, you cut him loose, you stop people from going in there the groceries gone sit there and rot and stuff. He eventually closed up, but he was kind of rotting. He treated Black people, and they had been spending money like anybody else, and he treat them bad.

32:06 RUFUS: It was two, two brothers. And the baddest one was named Ekle Fox.

32:21 HERMAN: He ain't own the store, did it?

32:24 RUFUS: Two brothers owned it together.

32:26 HERMAN: I thought one of them was just working for the other.

32:28 RUFUS: No. That's the one that was doing all the damage. Had them all on the truck with guns. Ekle Fox. Because the other fox, you know he was married to that lady that had the funeral home around there. But his brother, he was real nice.

32:50 HERMAN: It was a lot of people owned businesses that was real rough, including the mayor at that time. Row, wasn't it?

33:03 RUFUS: Mmm, no. What's the mail man name? Wasn't that him?

33:14 HERMAN: I thought it was Row.

33:15 RUFUS: It might have been.

33:17 HERMAN: It's been a long time ago. Ohhhh, I'm like I worked at my job 42 years. So I just retired.

33:24 RUFUS: Yeah, it's been a long time

33:29 HERMAN: You just look back and time—I never forget I went by the service station when we was walking to town and I seen a white dude whooping a Black kid with a belt. And I never could, I never took a good grip at that. You don't have a Black kid, what he doing out here whooping. And you know I just stood there and stood there. But it wasn't

nothing I could say because if I would have went over there and said anything to him, I probably could have handled it. What they gone do is arrest me. But now the white dude up here whooping the kid with a belt And I just, I couldn't ever get the grip of that. That was during the same time, integration. It was so much stuff that went on back there then.

34:18 DELONG: Now that it's later out, this isn't great practice, but how do you guys feel about possibly putting the chairs outside and shooting instead. Because the light here is pretty not great. It's not great. Um, how do you guys feel about that?

34:33 HERMAN: Like, we ain't through yet?

34:34 DELONG: We can be if you want to be

34:36 HERMAN: Cause we ain't get too much—It's not too much outside of that. Cause I always worked out of town so I can't really say how jobs is around here. So I don't know many people, especially white people, I don't know them too much because I stay in a Black neighborhood. And all my jobs out of town, so (shurges shoulders) but everybody just about know—

35:01 RUFUS: See I know a lot of them because I worked at the hospital 42 years. I know a lot of them come in. And at the hospital there they had uhh two lobbies. One for Blacks and one for whites. And they had one side at the hospital. One for whites and one for Blacks. So all of it came down, I think in the sixties, they changed all that.

35:26 HERMAN: That fast?

35:28 RUFUS: I think so. Yeah it might be in the seventies, I can't remember.

35:31 HERMAN: I know when you went to the clinic, the whites sit on that side and the Blacks over here. The Black side be full and you would have to stand up. And the white side be empty almost and you couldn't go over to that side though.

35:45 RUFUS: Yeah, I remember that.

35:49 HERMAN: But I ain't know too much about the bussing. I ain't know too much about that. I hardly ever—it's like they kept everybody separated. The white people rode the bus, the white bus. And we rode the Black bus.

36:03 RUFUS: Yeah.

36:05 DELONG: So the busses were segregated?

- 36:07 HERMAN: They was supposed to been, but they wasn't. I reckon Tallahatchie county, you know they have so much crooked money going on. But ehy had enough busses to carry white homes and carry the Blacks in the same route.
- 36:25 DELONG: Um and how do you feel like the legacy of the school integration affects you today? Affects Charleston today?
- 36:31 HERMAN: Probably no more than nobody else. You know it really ain't affect nobody. In the long run everybody healed up. You know I'm still gone say to the older bunch like me and Rufus, when all us pass away things gone get better. We know that because all of us got hard feelings that don't ever heal. You know that. But um, until the oldheads die we ain't gone ever get no better around—it's just not Charleston. I used to think that way, you know when you stay in one place you be thinking everybody, you know that all the trouble is here. But I talked to some—I have friends everywhere, you know Grenada and everywhere. And they just as bad
- 37:16 RUFUS: It's the same everywhere you go.
- 37:18 HERMAN: Around in this area.
- 37:23 RUFUS: Same thing. It's so rough in Memphis, that's my hometown. I had to leave there. It was rough.
- 37:38 HERMAN: Everybody just about stay to their own race and it's way less trouble. I'm gone put it that way. At that time. I think people get along a whole lot better now.
- 37:50 RUFUS: Well down South, it's better than up North. It might not be in the money wise, but in the living wise. And all the shooting and killing it ain't as bad as everywhere else.
- 38:05 HERMAN: Well I know I feel kind of bad for going up North. Cause I always—everybody always talking about how things better and we stopped in a little town, me and my nephew, about ten years ago. And uh we stopped in a little place, I done forgot what the little place was, but we just wanted some chicken, and we seen a [unclear]. We went up in this thing and we noticed that (laughs) we was the only Blacks in there. And so we was looking around and uh everytime a white come up in there, they just stop and stare at us. You know and that was kind of, creepy like. And I been in Mississippi and I been in a lot of different places that you wasn't supposed to go but didn't nobody stare at me like that. And I wasn't used to that. And I'm thinking about up here now things: in my mind everything different but it wasn't. So I'm thinking, I know now that It's rough everywhere. I was thinking we had it rough but it was rough everywhere. We did have it rough though. I still can't get over that uhh, two bedroom and going outside, you know. Stuff y'all probably never have to worry about no more. You don't see that nowhere no more hardly. But that was- my moment was the roughest thang, I couldn't understand, I

couldn't. I had one pair of shoes. You know when we got out of school at that time we had to pull them things off. That's during that time right there. We just didn't have nothing. Wasn't no jobs around here decent enough for your parents to afford nothing for you. And they didn't have- my mother didn't have no car and she one parent so you know how hard it probably- y'all probably don't know but it's hard for one parent, especially Black lady, in Charleston. It was hard for her. And you think about raising you kids, and you worked in somebody house, off that income. What can you do? I didn't understand that. Why these other kids got two or three pairs of shoes, and I got one. That's the part I didn't understand. Until I had to be on the other end. But I tried to give my kids, I struggled to give my kids more than I had. I made sure they had more than one pair of shoes, that was the first thing. But, to me it was rough. I used to go out there and walk out there barefoot. And scatch off. It's not because I wanted to, but it's the way we was. Got that good pair of shoes and you went barefooted. (shrugs) And stuff y'all call in style now, I used to cry. You know kids was tearing their pants out and wear them out? Mama get them and sew them up. I been sitting up there crying because I didn't have another pair of jeans some some—decent jeans to wear to school. And I was a teenager too. You know I wasn't used to, you know. I wanted to be like the rest of them. You know? To me that was hard. I always thought about that when I was working. So I always promised myself I would get me more than one pair of shoes and pants. But uh, y'all have no clue how I—(Rufus phone interrupts) My grandchildren—I tell them some nights, they go to laughing “granddaddy you ain’t” yeah. Because they don’t have to do that.

41:21 RUFUS: (Rufus on the phone) Hello. Yeah. I'm down to Mikell's. I'm down to Mikell's. Yeah we down talking. Yeah, aight (Ends call)

41:41 HERMAN: It was just-y'all, oowwee, y'all wouldn't believe it. If y'all had to go through it I don't think y'all could make it.

41:48 RUFUS: I'll tell y'all another thing that y'all haven't paid no attention to, on these farm, you don't see no houses, do you? You know why? Because the government wanted them to put bathroom in them houses, they tore them down. You don't see no house on no plantation. That's obvious. They wanted them to put bathrooms on the inside, they tore them all down.

42:11 HERMAN: Yeah it was a lot of them outside.

42:13 RUFUS Yep, but it's been like that for a long time. A long long time. That's the reason you don't see no houses on plantations now. Hardly ever.

42:26 HERMAN: And back there then when school integrated if you didn't work on a farm, you had no kind of way to have a half decent life. And my mama she ain't working, you know couldn't work on a farm. I remember all that time we was going to school before integration, we had to go in the cotton field every summer. But one thing they cut off

when I was at Allan Carver though, now I remember this good. School was let out. And white kids was still going to school, and I couldn't understand that. Why they going to school and we out so early? They let us out because we had to pick cotton and stuff.

43:09 RUFUS: Chop cotton, pick cotton all that stuff.

43:12 HERMAN: And then when I was working, we went back to school. I was in that.

43:17 DELONG: What year was this?

43:18 HERMAN: Oh, man. I was in school but we was still at Allan Carver at that time. When schools integrated they had cut it out, they had stopped that two year before we integrated. But that went on, I know ain't nobody probably said nothing about it but we was out of school anytime that's picking cotton time. Or hoeing cotton and picking cotton school was turn out. Black school was turn out. I was in that group. I had a cousin that stayed in the country so, (laughs) we had to go down there. That's actually how we got our little school clothes and stuff. We went down there and worked. But, at the time we was doing it, I never you know as a kid you don't know. You be wondering in your mind what's going on. You see the what kid's bus still running and you out here picking. You know we hated that. But, that's the way things was. Like to me, to me Tallahatchie county was the last somebody to stop that stuff. You know, turning school out in the summer. Turn you out before school was out. This county here, everybody say this country here rougher than any county in this are. I don't really know. I ain't never lived in another one, so. I couldn't really—I ain't just gone really say that. But it was tough here.

44:59 DELONG: Um, do you guys have anything else you want to add? (inaudible)

45:04 HERMAN: No, not really.

45:07 DELONG: Rufus, if you don't mind me asking, would you mind telling me a little bit about you sister really quick?

45:13 RUFUS: What now?

45:13 DELONG: Your sister.

45:16 RUFUS: Well, she, only thing I know after she came back from Parchman she went to school and ain't had no more problems and she got grown so she work at Parchman now.

45:30 DELONG: Really?

45:31 RUFUS: Yeah. Yeah she work at Parchman. So evidently being over there ain't have no fear in here. Because she over there now and been working there for years and years. Sure is.

45:50 HERMAN: I don't really think they was scared. I think we was scared outside. The ones stayed here was scarier than the ones that went.

45:59 RUFUS: Uh, yeah. Everybody worried. Children come back laughing, they had a good time.

46:05 HERMAN: I know, but like you said, that was a tension time though. Charleston. Charleston was just like a bomb then. Anything could've happened. Anything would've happened to them kids, you wouldn't have this interview now. Because probably, you know what I'm saying? The history would have made itself. If one kids would've come back hurt. It would've been rough for Charleston. It probably changed quicker than it was supposed to. Because I know, people back there then that's all they, they was ready to start some. But I reckon that was probably some of the reason they brought them back quick too. They was stirring up more problems then they wanted. Around here they try to keep everything in Tallahatchie county. You probably already know. They'll lie about anything. But you know they try to keep everything on the down low. Like it was so good. (shaking his head) Ain't nobody been good over here. They still do you, well they don;t do it too much now, it's just now change because you got Blacks in power too. All the whites moving out of town now, so you got bigger Blacks. So we got the first new mayor. And um my son in law was the first head coach out here at east tally. So you know he the first Black coach they had, in football now. They had a Black basketball coach. He the first head leader. But history change little by little, but look how long it took. Just about everybody else done had a Black coach and all that. But you know, then he had trouble when he got there. He caught it. He lost two games and they called him to the office and then wanted to know—They done gave him everything he got, everything he wanted, what the problem was he can't give them a championship. Now we have a ahead coach now, white. I'm just showing you a difference. He done lost all the games and we got a losing team now. Ain't nobody call him in the office an he still got his job. But now they threatened him, he lost two games and he was playing bigger schools. But we went on to win the championship that year but you know i'm just saying. That's the difference they did. And then we aint talking about no long long time. We talking about five years, you look back. And you probably can look it up and see when the first Black head coach and that's when it was. So you know, they still doing it. But things changed. Because you know the right to vote is what's saving everybody. If you don't like some, that's why you got the right now to go up there and vote. You get the right people in there and you think it's right. That's what helped the system out to me. So far people learn, I used to didn't know the value—I didn't know the value of my vote. I'm probably one of them way back that used to say that this one vote ain't gone mean nothing, but it was supposed to mean more to me than just a vote. Because we used to couldn't vote.

(making reference to a fly) if you don't swing at him you'll be alright, don't swing at him. But now as I got older, I learned that everybody vote count. If you want change, that's how you change things. To me. So I exercise it every chance I get. It's like family reunions. Both of them the same to me. Because I used to didn't think family reunions was important, but you think. I got old now, and I got folks up North that only time we see one another is at a funeral. And I go up there and I see all these kids, these kids is my kinfolks. I don't know nothing about them, that's because family reunion, that's what keep people together but I guess you got to get old to learn that. We about through. I reckon we through.

50:21 DELONG: You sure? Anything you want to add, Rufus? Mikell?

50:24 RUFUS: A couple of years ago, the high sheriff, Niel Ferguson. I got to fighting, with a white man, down in the country. He came down there and told that man, he say "you done messed with the wrong boy. He don't mess with nobody just take care of his family. Everybody thought they was gone kill me down there and tell him what's what. I ain't had no more problems with none of them. And he dead now. That sheriff was (inaudible). Everybody saying this "man I thought you was dead." (laughs) I said nope.

51:14 HERMAN: You know, before he was there. You know the rough time (both laugh) I know the rough time with the sheriffs. Now I can always go back on that now. Owwee. We had a sheriff so rough.

51:29 RUFUS: Which one was that? Eddie Doe?

51:30 HERMAN: Eddie Doe. Ohh Lord. Black man nightmare. He go up there every Sunday morning. He used to go up there to the jail house and see who up there new. (mocking Eddie Doe) "Ohh, got me a new boy in here." And he'll tell him go down stairs and walk up, the old jail house. And uh, I had a friend he went to jail he was scared and he say they called him out, go down stairs and talk to us at the door. He said when he come out, he kicked at him. But he had jumped out the way, they said he kick everybody new that come down there. And you Black. It was rough. They had a lot of killing in jail then. You see that stuff on, *In the Heat of the Night*? Well, *Heat of the Night* was in Charleston. It's alot of Black people dying in that jail house. That nobody know hang theyself. At that time I didn't know no Black people crazy enough to hang theyself because life was so short and you tried to live as long as you could. But we had out—wish law enforcement we had a hard time. We had it too hard. Had it where we had Black polices and we had white. And the white can arrest anybody but the Black police couldn't arrest nobody but the Blacks. That's how hard things been in Charleston. But things did change. And I reckon it will, you have to wait. We don't need to talk about them police too hard.

53:20 RUFUS: No, they only did what they was told.
[End of Interview]